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Frijoles, Sushi, and Chittlins on a Bagel: Trivializing Ethnic Studies Through Politically Correct and Racist Educational Practice

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In today's United States (US) educational environment much talk is given to planning for and the teaching of "politically correct cultural diversity." While some see this as a blessing, others see it as a waste of time. There is a school of educators that view "politically correct cultural diversity" as a panacea to racial and ethnic unrest in today's schools and society at large. Some see this academic emphasis as form of "polite institutionalized racism." Another equally vocal group of educators present "politically correct cultural diversity" as divisive and destructive of the "American way of life." While the discourse created by these polar perspectives has generated many scholarly articles, there has been little evolution and actual institutionalization of non-mainstream cultural points of view into the curriculum. This reality holds true from pre-school to post-doctoral work.

The research effort that has generated this paper started four years ago (1992) when students at San José State University (SJSU) once again demanded that all students graduating from SJSU take three units of upper division course work in ethnic studies as part of their degree. The students further demanded that this class examine racism as it occurs in contemporary US society, the history of race relations in the US, and the relationship between racism and sexism in the US. No undergraduate student seeking a degree at SJSU will be exempted from the course.

This was the tenth time since 1968 that students at SJSU have formally made this demand. The first time the demand was formally

expressed was part of a Chicano student walkout of the SJSU sponsored commencement. At this time, the graduating Chicano/a seniors publically stated that no course in the SJSU curriculum directly related academically to the development of Chicano/a communities. Yet, these communities were rapidly becoming the largest minority in the service area of the university. Each time the demand has been made since 1968, the university has either outright refused to do more than "study the situation," or proposed an alternative that was so "watered down" that all who actually took or gave the classes found them a "waste of time."

Meanwhile, "racial incidents" continued to occur on campus. "White flight" from the campus is a reality, especially among Anglo-European males. Racial relations between groups of color, as well as between minorities and Anglo-Europeans continued to deteriorate. To counter this, five years ago the SJSU instituted "cultural pluralism" classes. For many of the students, these classes were regarded as "holiday studies" and "ethnic history days." Minority students noted that "white students" sought out "safe, trivialized" classes from white teachers to satisfy the requirement, while students of color enrolled in classes with minority faculty.

As part of an effort to address these experiences, this paper examines the realities and general trends that support the racist trivialization of ethnic and racial groups. This examination will be placed in the context of the current round of negotiations to create an ethnic studies graduation requirement at San José State University. In addition, this paper will list the objectives for a course designed to meet an ethnic studies graduation requirement. These objectives are designed to insure that this requirement will deliver a curriculum that is more than a scattering of frijoles, chittlins and sushi on a bagel.

In order to examine general trends that did more than put new labels on old bottles and did not trivialize their heritage, faculty and students of color sought goals for classes by asking the following questions:

1. Can "minority" and/or ethnic points of view and the perspectives they generate be expressed authentically within the pluralistic model?
2. What are the curricular processes necessary for expressing "minority" and/or ethnic points of view and perspectives?
3. Does the concept of "diversity" as well as the policies upon this concept serve the curricular needs of "minority" and/or ethnic communities?

As the discussion of these questions evolved, those participating in the San Jose State Ethnic Studies Task Force, as the group came to be called, found that during the last three to five years much "lip service" has been paid to insuring that "minorities" and their perspectives are represented in the process of policy making and instruction. Much of this representation has occurred in an "advisory capacity" with no actual policy

making power. Even this level of participation has been driven for the most part by the changing demography of the US (Ruscioletti 1994).

At the same time, much attention has been given insuring politically correct language and program (Carpenter 1994). The most commonly used buzzwords to come out of these politically correct cultural ideologies are "diversity" and "multi-cultural strategies." These terms allow for "minorities" to anticipate an "equitable" and theoretically attainable common ground with the dominant groups of the society while "decentering" the dominant cultural focus (Ruscioletti 1994). In addition, this promise is supported by unidirectional, assimilation based, "pluralistic" criteria that has found its way into the policies of governmental bureaucracies as well as finding favor with the academic keepers of scholarly disciplines (Bryant 1994).

The "lip service" trend has led to the strategic societal reality of "multicultural diversity," supported by the notion that "one is many" and "many is one," with each phrase being the euphemism of the other (Brydon and Scott 1994). Often the users of this strategy forget or are unaware that these notions mean different things in different cultural contexts. This lack of memory aside, this strategic reality trend has become the rationalized response to changing cultural demographics and educational priorities (Greene 1993). Moreover, this rationalization suggests the policy question of whose rights have the greatest value: the unvoiced minorities, or the voiced dominant groups?

Educational researchers have also used "multicultural diversity" as a methodology to make the "minority" over into the image of the dominant society. This is an educational process that supports a racist styled form of assimilation (Sleeter 1993). These same researchers look to assimilation as a solution to the threat of "fragmenting diversity," and then prevent the assimilation process by assaulting and eliminating cross-cultural acculturation (West 1990). This mutes the minority position at best and more often silences it. From this point on in the process of "multicultural education," the dominant group is left only with its opinion of the minority group as if that opinion was the position of the minority group. Ethnic Studies, in this context, is viewed as a fragmenting threat to the homogeneous position, for by its very nature, Ethnic Studies is a culturally mixed, cross cultural discipline. The trap that ethnic researchers and educators may fall into in the multicultural setting is to try and out-"white" the dominant group in its presentation of the cross-cultural setting.

For the overall reality, academicians often couch this racist, ethnocidal dysfunction in the question, "How far can the rights and freedom of the 'minority individual' be extended and still allow for the 'greatest good for the dominant group?'" The reverse of this question also compounds the issues at hand, "How can the 'dominant group' be maintained without

infringing upon the rights of 'minority individuals' within the group?" Neither of these policy questions helps the academicians gain a perspective (Banks 1993). At best, these questions produce only a point of view. Often they focus upon blaming the victim (Ryan 1992). Thus, minority students in a typical Eurocentric college classroom are not given "opportunities to create knowledge themselves and identify ways in which the knowledge they construct is influenced and limited by their personal assumptions, positions, and experiences" (Banks 1993: 11). For this reason, neither the controlled nor the controllers have a perspective.

Further analysis of the literature on this topic reveals that the question goes far beyond euphemisms such as right and wrong or patriotism as in "love your country, right or wrong." When working with the multiple points of view that occur in large populations with diverse origins and perspectives, the question becomes a series of multiple points of view that use "right" and "wrong" as part of a perspectivistic give and take (McCarthy 1994). From each group's point of view, they are right, nevertheless, it is the wrong in the equation that makes them right. For example, perspectivistically speaking, one would be many and many would be one: acculturation rather than assimilation. Without the point of view of "right" and the point of view of "wrong" there is no perspective.

In another strategic trend, the concept of "diversity" as well as the policies based upon this concept are not designed to meet the curricular needs of "minority" and/or ethnic communities. At first glance the incorporation of "diversity" appears to be an alternative to the "romantic" styled presentations of pluralism teaching strategies. But, if the questions are asked, "diverse to what and from what," the educator and policy setter are stuck with the alternative of "homogeneity" (Crichlow *et al.* 1990). Phrases like "one out of many," "many from one," and "many as one" allude to the "diverse/homogeneous" point of view. In this setting while there is expected diversity between cultures separated by geographical distance, "diversity" within a given culture is often not stated. In addition, this concept often masks attempts to recognize perspectivistic elements. While the term "diversity" allows "minorities" to anticipate an "equitable" and theoretically attainable common ground with the dominant groups of the society, actual historical experience has demonstrated that this promise is often an empty one (Janzen 1994). Instead of a two-way cultural exchange based upon the notion of diverse cultures being equal to all cultures in terms of the unity of their own cultural system, current policy and curriculum has been limited to a one-way cultural indoctrination of the "minority" group by the dominant group. This is done from the dominant group's point of view, with the justification that selected "politically correct" items from the "diverse minority" are included as part of the indoctrination (Estrada and McLaren 1993).

According to Schaefer, "In the United States assimilation is encouraged by dominant White Society. The assimilationist perspective tends to devalue alien culture and treasure the dominant" (Schaefer 1990: 43). This reality, which is supported by the notions of "diversity" and "cultural pluralism," is especially repugnant to Chicanos and Amerindians who consider themselves as indigenous peoples to this space. In moving away from the concept of "diversity" as indoctrination of minorities to the dominant cultural perspective, methods for recognizing the position of the points of view in the expressed perspective need to be examined (Sleeter 1992).

Other educational planners argue about "diversity" and "multiple points of view" in the framework of right and wrong. They see homogeneity of thought and "national purpose" as a single voice. Moreover, they view the current dominant voice as the "right voice" and "inoffensive." Those points of view not in sync with the "right voice" are classed as "offensive": "ethnic, minority, dissonant, separatist, not in the national interest, reverse racist, and/or unpatriotic." The politically correct "right voice" couches the offensive terms in euphemistic phrases to avoid confrontation and change. For this reason the problem becomes two-fold. While the policy setters and academicians do not hold a perspective, they are also avoiding all other points of view that are necessary to gain a perspective. Thus, they create, "false images or stereotypes that become real in their consequences" (Schaefer 1990: 9).

In addition, the trends involving the concept of "diversity" are evolving out of the reality that "diversity" is often being used as a code word for "minority," "ethnic," "racial," and/or "different." In the literature the term "diversity" is appearing synonymous with "divergent," or to "diverge." It is also being used as a place holder for divergence in the context of being "less than." In this context, "white" is seen as "normal" or "non-divergent" and all else is seen as "diverse" or "less-than normal" or even "abnormal." The argument within this trend becomes further extended when "what is white or European" is equated with what is "human." Therefore, those associated with "diversity" (people of color) are considered as less than human. Thus, "diversity" has become an institutionalized, racist code word for the study of "those people" who are considered less than human. This is an unmasking of a "politically correct" reality designed to trivialize the cultures of people of color and institutionalize them into permanent positions of subordination through the formal educational process.

Instead of developing ways to lump a variety of groups into "world class, trivialized, mass cultures," minority curriculum developers and educators need to research those processes that focus on how the learner in a cross-cultural setting can best discover the underlying elements of each specific culture. Therefore, to most minority researchers, what many

“traditional” educational planners are doing is creating new labels for old curricular strategies to maintain the educational advantage of the current dominant group (Martínez 1996). These tactical strategies are designed to secure the dominant group’s homogeneous point of view, for the near future when it loses the numerical majority (Estrada and McLaren 1993). These same researchers also point out that where the pluralistic methodology of muting the educational and learning strategies of “minority groups” exists, the long run loss of human resources for the total society far outweighs the short run gain made by the dominant group (Pérez 1993). All of the above listed trends will continue until a consistent and conscious effort by minority academicians and communities is employed to reverse them.

The first step in reversing the racially motivated trivialization process is to positively include the minority view point in the curriculum development activities. The San Jose State Ethnic Studies Task Force defined viewpoint and/or point of view as a position on a certain question held by an individual or cultural group that reveals how and why that individual or group has shaped its beliefs, attitudes and/or values. In this sense the point of view is that part of the environment that humans have created. A cultural view point can only be preserved as a viewpoint if the point of view is permitted intergenerational transmission (Mercer and Wanderer 1974).

The second step to reversing the trivialization process is to clarify the perspective of the dominant society. The Task Force defined perspective as a position held by an individual or cultural group of a belief, attitude or value about how “another” group or individual formed and held their beliefs, attitudes or values. The perspectivistic strategy can be extended to comparing one cultural group’s responses to their environment with another set of responses in the same manner.

The third step in the reversal is to establish an evaluative curricular process for balancing the dominant society’s perspective with the reality of any given minority culture’s point of view without trivializing the minority’s culture. In the words of Lu Min-Zhan:

Seemingly simple markers such as skin color, native tongue, ethnic heritage or nationality can neither prescribe nor pre-script the range of voices likely to surface . . . How to voice and talk to, rather than speaking for and about the voices of the “other” within and among cultures, is thus not a question which can be resolved prior to or outside of the process of negotiation. Rather, it must remain a concern guiding our action as we take part in it (Min-Zhan 1994: 456).

Those involved in the field research of this project at SJSU found that to get at the actual underlying cultural assumptions of an instructional setting, more than one equation had to be analytically applied. For the

ethnic studies curriculum designer the patterns voiced and unvoiced in the points of view and perspectives often are the underlying assumptions that "provide maps of what the world is believed to be like. They constitute guidelines for identifying and solving problems" (Cotgrove 1982: 33).

The reality of using multiple analytical equations from a single point of view came to the forefront when the Task Force began researching the appropriate goals for the actual course development and the creation of bibliographic text lists. While the attempt to provide "multiple equations" is laudable, truncating the analysis through racist, institutionalized trivialization defeats the purpose. For example, since 1992, there has been a series of new texts and anthologies aimed at those courses teaching cultural pluralism that have an "Asian" section, a "Hispanic" section, a "Native American" section, a "Gender" section, and an "Afro-American" section. A complete culture, set of cultures, and/or sub-cultures are described historically and topically in forty pages or less, including photographs and graphics. These works have titles like: *American Ethnicity*; *Experiencing Race Class and Gender in the US*; *Multi-cultural Experiences*, *Multicultural Theories*, or *The Meaning of Difference*, *American Constructions of Race, Social Class, and Sexual Orientation*. The actual cultural map and/or identity of a specific group is lost in the process of this type of delivery, but publishers of books are hesitant to publish a work unless all the alleged "major groups" are included. Yet, the cultural richness and the variety of life styles of peoples from the Americas are lost and trivialized in chapters that identify the common "cultural characteristics" of "Indians" and "Hispanics." The same can also be said of the other groups mentioned. At best, many of these works create stereotypes that have some degree of usefulness for the dominant society in its relationships with a generalized and trivialized minority culture. In the words of Richard Schaefer, these texts demonstrate that:

In the United States cultural pluralism is more of an ideal than a reality. Though there are vestiges of cultural pluralism-in the various ethnic neighborhoods in major cities, for instance-the general rule has been for subordinate groups to assimilate. (Shaefer 1990: 47)

In addition, in the context of politically correct trivialization, diversity and cultural pluralism, the notion of what is a culture and what cultural elements need to be examined, is seen from the point of view of the dominant society. The SJSU Ethnic Studies Task Force documented this point of view with trivialized and generalized examples found in the university curriculum designed to teach "cultural pluralism." The work of the Task Force began to reveal that the social dominance paradigms currently in vogue, control the inflection of the substance by manipulating the perspective of the minority groups through the point of view of the

dominant group. Since the “pluralism teaching strategy” follows “humanism” and the thought patterns of Western Europe, the minority cultures being studied in pluralist classrooms are constantly being ranked and compared to the Anglo/European “cultural standard.” Words such as “third-world” (not even second class), “disadvantaged,” and “under developed” find constant expression. Thus, while “pluralism” can express the dominant society’s perspective on a series of groups, the minority point of view is often muted and/or trivialized. This is compounded by the manipulation of inflection to maintain politically correct vocabulary to mask the negative ethnic and/or racial feelings. Because the manipulated inflection is constantly being changed by the curriculum policies of the dominant group, the ground rules for assimilation by the minority group is also being changed (Ryan 1992).

In classes emphasizing “trivialized differences,” the presentation of ethnic groups often emphasize the folk/rural/peasant/traditional culture, which may or may not be the dominant current life way of the groups being studied. To prevent this trivialization through stereotyping, educators might, for example, utilize a strategy where minority group cultures in the US are studied by the analysis of the stereotypes built around urban gangs or migrant farmworkers. Simultaneously, the educator must also supply the culturally based voice and point of view of the minority discourse. Once the underlying element in the stereotypes are revealed, however, it can only be minimally modified, but not replaced. In this way the specific elements retain their inflected forms. For example: “I agree that you are victims of exploitation because you are the beneficiaries of a corrupt welfare system.”

If the victims (the receivers of the benefits) agree with this paradigm they are in a no win situation. If the beneficiaries disagree with this paradigm they are also in a no win situation. The dominant tone or inflection creates the no win situation through agreement in the form of the paradigm. By shifting the paradigm to the cultural institution of education, the above paradigm becomes: “I agree that educators in a multicultural setting are victims of exploitation because they are the beneficiaries of a politically correct educational policy.”

Since most minority educators are not in positions of dominance, they are not in a position to change the overall curriculum strategy or create new policy. However, by knowing how labels and inflection manipulate point of view and mute the minority voice, the minority educator in a multicultural environment can teach the student how to get out of these no win situations. To this end ethnic studies educators must learn strategies for both no win and win situations in a multicultural setting. This can best be achieved by determining both the actual and hidden priorities for public education without trivializing the cross cultural content

of the student to maintain the politically correct position of the educational form. Without this knowledge the minority educator is caught in the racist trap of chasing dead rabbits as if they were new cross cultural paradigms for the improvement of instruction in a cross-cultural classroom.

To clarify and amplify this assertion, let us look at yet another example of a no win cross-cultural paradigm: "We agree that a native resident is declared a foreigner and the invading alien is considered a citizen."

This paradigm occurred in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo between the United States and Mexico in 1848. When teaching this no win paradigm to the student, the educator must not agree or disagree with the paradigm. In this situation the educator must assist the student's thinking processes to facilitate the rejection of the validity of the paradigm. This is done by teaching the student to recognize the values and disvalues in the paradigm that mute the points of view being expressed. In the case of the native *vs.* citizen paradigm the values are loaded in favor of the dominant society and all the disvalues are loaded against the subdominant group.

The first priority for the student is to identify the contradictions in the value laden labels (Schaefer 1990). The next priority is to identify ironies. The third priority is to identify the paradox. The forth priority is to demonstrate how this process illustrates a no win situation. For the student in an ethnic studies setting, the solution is then to reject the paradox by not agreeing or disagreeing with the paradigm. The overall priority for this process is to get the student to think through the process of tacit agreement to a no win paradigm.

Thus, to limit or prevent racist trivialization the ethnic studies curriculum developer must, as a first step, produce cross-cultural relationships by combining the concepts of: (1) direct relationships and (2) inverse relationships. These relationships go beyond Eurocentric analysis by examining the level of flexibility in the reality of a cross-cultural paradigm. Examples for the examination of direct relationships in this context are:

1. More inflexibility leads to more limited cross-cultural relationships.
2. Less flexibility leads to less limited cross-cultural relationships.

Examples of inverse relationships in this paradigm are:

1. Less flexibility leads to more limited cross-cultural relationships.
2. More inflexibility leads to less limited cross-cultural relationships.

The second step to the prevention and/or limitation of racist trivialization is to identify the combinations that lead to concept formation

and critical thinking in the cross cultural setting. For the minority curriculum developer, this process is one where the most limited cultural means/results leads to concept formation and the least limited cultural means/results leads to critical thinking.

The third step in preventing and/or limiting racist trivialization, is to find out which are the controlling relationships of the cross-cultural setting. To do this, the ethnic studies curriculum developer must read the policy and priorities for a given academic setting to determine the desired direction and desired effect of the curriculum. At this point the minority educator must shift from conceptual formative thinking to strategic interpretive thinking. However, if values or disvalues are added to the desired effects, then the educator will be employing strategic critical thinking. By knowing this, the ethnic studies educator is in a position to employ an infinite set of cross-cultural combinations to instruct the student without the risk of cultural trivialization.

Utilizing the three-step process described above the SJSU Ethnic Studies Task Force developed the following set of goals and objectives to assess a given course's ability to meet the needs of students. In addition, through a four-year series of campus climate surveys and open hearings, we found that an ethnic studies course that would be directed towards a graduation requirement for all students at SJSU would have to meet the following goals, objectives and requirements:

A. Goals:

1. To develop an understanding of racism, of groups historically oppressed in the United States of America on the basis of race, and of this history's effects on contemporary society.
2. To begin thereby the processes of breaking down racial barriers, creating bridges of communication, and building community at San José State University.
3. In turn, to equip students with problem-solving skills which address the impact of racism in the USA.

B. Objectives:

After completing an Ethnic Studies course, students should be able:

1. To understand theories concerning the nature and causes of racism.
2. To describe the history or a significant aspect of the history of at least one of the historically racially oppressed peoples.
3. To recognize and evaluate the implications of racial oppression in contemporary society.

4. To examine perceptions, prejudices, propaganda, myths and stereotypes regarding racial groups.
5. To analyze and compare conflicting interpretations of facts and statistics concerning the effects of racism on various groups.
6. To formulate and/or evaluate solutions to racism.
7. To articulate perspectives learned through intellectual and social interaction with people of diverse economic, political, and ethnic backgrounds.
8. To identify the difference in impact of racism on people according to their class, gender and sexual orientation.

C. Course Requirements:

1. Each Ethnic Studies course must focus primarily on a group or groups of people who have been historically and systematically oppressed in the United States of America on the basis of their color (such as African-Americans, Chicanos [Mexican-Americans], Asian-Americans or Native-Americans).
2. It must examine the group's (groups') oppression, resistance, struggles, contributions and achievements to provide a deeper understanding of these cultures and how they have shaped the United States' cultures in general.
3. Through various activities, each ethnic studies course will provide students with some opportunity to interact directly with people of diverse economic, political and ethnic backgrounds.

The process of coming to consensus regarding criteria for an ethnic studies requirement ultimately provided the members of the Task Force with an opportunity for precisely the kind of untrivialized, cross-cultural, interactive and productive exchange of ideas and of values that an ethnic studies requirement should give to students. The discussion, which was at times lively and even heated, led to mutual understanding for every member of the Task Force. Each of us came away with the conviction that he/she had both learned and grown from the experience. It is unfortunate that more members of the San José State University faculty, staff and student body have not had such an opportunity.

In summary, this paper supports the notion that "minority" and/or ethnic points of view and the perspectives they generate are not expressed authentically within a trivialized "pluralistic model." Furthermore, the concept of "diversity" as well as the politically correct policies built upon this concept do not serve the curricular needs of "minority" and/or ethnic communities. In addition, the findings of this article reveal that in the creation of criteria and paradigms aimed at the voicing of multiple points

of view, the prevention of racist trivialization, and the production of quality cross-cultural content and teaching techniques, the educator must remember that cross-cultural paradigms do not exist unless they are combined strategically through the control of cultural values and disvalues. These cultural values and disvalues must be equitably expressed in terms of their specified point of view and specific environmental setting. The development of cross-cultural educational paradigms, is necessary to discover the controlling relationships at different levels of the cross-cultural instructional process: bi-conceptual development and critical thinking.

Assuming that educators are willing to engage in mutual accommodation in meeting the needs of their students (Nieto 1992), and by utilizing the processes documented in this paper, they will be in a position to employ infinite sets of unmuted cross-cultural combinations while minimizing the process of racist, politically correct trivialization.

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